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Support CAFTA

Our position: Floridians in Congress should be leading the charge for trade agreement.

Latin America is "really in trouble," as U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez of Florida said recently. Democracy is under siege, especially in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia. And Mr. Martinez rightly worries the contagion could spread to other countries in the region, including those in Central America.

Congress would give a timely boost to democracy in Latin America by approving CAFTA, the free-trade agreement with five Central American countries and the Dominican Republic. The agreement would make U.S. trade preferences permanent for the CAFTA countries. Those preferences, by spurring economic growth, have helped lift those countries out of the abyss of civil war to democracy.

Former President Jimmy Carter has called CAFTA "a chance to reinforce democracies in the region." As Mr. Carter has warned, rejecting the agreement "would undercut these fragile democracies, compel them to retreat to protectionism, and make it harder for them to cooperate with the U.S."

But CAFTA is more than just a means to bolster democracy in Latin America. It also would open markets in the CAFTA countries to U.S. goods and services, creating jobs and opportunity for American exporters. The National Association of Manufacturers projects that U.S. exports of manufactured goods would grow \$1 billion annually under CAFTA.

Almost one-half of trade between the United States and the CAFTA countries moves through Florida. History says CAFTA's approval would boost that flow, adding to the more than 500,000 trade-related jobs in the state.

Passage of CAFTA also is an essential step toward the goal of a broader, hemisphere-wide free-trade agreement. If Miami's bid to be headquarters for that agreement succeeds, Florida will gain thousands more jobs.

Yet despite his well-founded worries about Latin America, Mr. Martinez hasn't committed to supporting CAFTA. Nor has his Senate colleague from Florida, Bill Nelson, even though he has voted for prior free-trade agreements. Spokesmen for both senators said they are concerned about CAFTA's impact on Florida agriculture.

Florida's politically powerful sugar industry is fighting the trade agreement because it would allow a tiny increase in sugar imports. But the state's citrus industry, represented by the 11,000-member Florida Citrus Mutual Association, endorsed CAFTA this month. Nationally, the American Farm Bureau Federation has estimated that CAFTA would boost U.S. agricultural exports by \$1.5 billion a year. There is far more at stake in this agreement than sugar's agenda.

There are winners and losers in every trade agreement. But on balance, CAFTA is a good deal for Central America, the United States and Florida. Mr. Martinez and Mr. Nelson, and Florida's 25 U.S. House members, should be leading the charge for its approval.